

Nurses earning higher degrees, but staffing hurdles remain

WCTC, Carroll seek to broaden applicant pool

By Jake Ekdahl
jekdahl@conley.net.com
262-513-2657

WAUKESHA — According to a new report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the number of students completing bachelor's and advanced degrees in health science fields such as nursing has risen, but worker shortages remain an issue.

The Forum analyzed data from the 18 institutions that form the Higher Education Regional Alliance, including Carroll University and Waukesha County Techni-

cal College.

“These data show that the total number of students completing degrees and certificates in health science fields at HERA institutions was modestly higher in 2019 compared to 2011. The number of students completing bachelor's and advanced degrees in health science fields, however, was 45.6% higher in 2019 than in 2011,” the report finds.

“Meanwhile the number of students completing shorter certificate and associate degree programs in health science fields

declined by 14%. This suggests some of the increase in bachelor's and advanced degrees represents an upward shift among students to higher-level programs that require longer time commitments.”

Senior Researcher Joe Peterangelo said he was surprised to see such a sharp rise in more advanced degrees compared to certificates with shorter timelines.

“I knew there was always a big demand for CNAs [certified nursing assistants] in the region, so seeing the



File photo

WCTC nursing student McKayla Nelson wears a mask and goggles in April 2020.

number completing those programs has dropped off was surprising to me,” he said. “There's been discussion of the nursing shortage for quite a while, and it's at all levels.”

See **NURSES**, PAGE 6A

Nurses

From Page 1A

Carroll University Nursing Department Chair Dr. Teri Kaul said one factor that's likely driving the trend is an industry preference for more advanced degrees, citing studies that show nurses with that level of training spur better patient outcomes.

With the ongoing need for more nurses, one strategy being developed is broadening the pool of potential applicants.

"It seems like women still are really accounting for the vast majority, over 80% of students completing health science programs," Peterangelo said. "Black and Latinx (students), especially are underrepresented in the health care workforce (and) education programs. Right now, black students represent only less than 4% of the bachelor's and advanced degrees in health science being completed in the region. That's far lower than their representation in the population."

The Medical College of Wisconsin is not a HERA member, so no medical schools training physicians were analyzed.

Kaul said Carroll is working to address diversity in the nursing industry with its new associate degree in nursing program at the United Community Center in Milwaukee, which is beginning this fall. The program starts students on the path to an associate's degree with opportunities for continuing to a bachelor's degree later.

"We feel like we have a plan in place," Kaul said. "And these are students who really want to be nurses."

WCTC Associate Dean of Nursing Colleen Nuckolls said the college's associate's degree program has actually increased in applicants over the last few years.

"I attribute this increase in students to our excellent reputation in the community as an affordable, high quality program, our high state board pass rates, job market, and competitive nature of getting into nursing school at this time," she said.

WCTC also has a program in nursing designed to assist paramedics who wish to become RNs as well as programs designed to help returning nursing students transition back to school.

"Widening our demographics has been a challenge for nursing as a predominantly female career," Nuckolls said. "We have hosted men in health care events to promote men in all health care fields we offer. We have also partnered with our Adult Basic Ed and English as a Second Language team to offer students the opportunity to visit our school of health classes to learn about our programs." Transcribed credits for high school students are also available.

The report concludes that despite the challenges associated with finding enough nurses and other health care workers, there remains "a great deal of untapped potential (as) a large share of high school graduates do not enroll in any college. HERA leaders say the challenge is to get more students to enroll in college and to create welcoming and supportive environments for them once they arrive."